

G-D CHANGES HIS MIND

By Rabbi David Algaze

... "I will blot out Man... for I have reconsidered My having made them." (Bereshheet 6:7)

The Creation ended in failure. The beautiful dreams that G-d had envisioned for Man crumbled under the weight of man's avarice and malice. With the exception of Noah, all men were deemed unworthy of existence and G-d decides to wipe the entire human race. This is one of the most frightening stories ever told, of destruction of everything that G-d created, of everything of which it had been said by G-d to have been "good." In one sweep, all vegetation, the lush pastures and fruit-bearing trees of every kind, all animals of every species—with the exception of some animals that would be needed to replenish the earth after the Flood—and all men, women and children, are all destroyed. In just ten generations, the world has come to an end. How could this have happened?

The first puzzling question is why did not G-d anticipate the developments before they happened and thus desist from creating these people in the first place? Verbs such as "reconsidered" and being "sad" seem out of place when referring to Hashem. What do they mean in this context?

The Ohr Hachayim (R. Hayyim ben Attar, 1696-1743) comments that this was a lesson that G-d wanted Man to learn about freedom. Although G-d knew in advance what was going to happen, nonetheless He did not prevent it, nor did He desist from creating these people. At the moment of Creation, G-d rejoiced with His creatures although He knew that eventually they would sin and He would have to destroy them. However, by allowing Man to act freely and dispose of the world and his gifts as he saw fit without any Divine intervention, G-d was clearly demonstrating the basic lesson that He gives Man total freedom to act. Consequently, Man will be subject to both reward and punishment according to his deeds. G-d's foreknowledge has no affect whatsoever on Man's deeds.

Although He knew that this was going to happen, nonetheless He felt sadness when the time for Destruction came. The Akedat Yitzhak (R. Isaac Arama, 1420-1494) explains it by comparing it to a man who grows trees for lumber. Although he knows that he will eventually have to chop down those trees, nonetheless when the time comes for chopping them down, he feels sorry for those beautiful trees that he had nurtured so carefully. The Midrash narrates the story of a non-Jew who asked Rabbi Yeoshua ben Korcha, "If G-d knows the future,

why was He sad?" The Rabbi replied, "Was a child ever born to you? What did you do?" The heathen replied, "I rejoiced!" But did you not know that he would eventually have to die? The heathen said, "At the time of rejoicing one must rejoice, at the time of sadness, one must feel sad." The Rabbi then remarked, "So it is with G-d, when He created Man He was happy but when He decided that He had to cut him down, he experienced "sadness." (Bereshit Rabba 27)

There are two additional lessons that can be learned from this story. The first is that evil must be cut down. Wickedness and immorality do not have room in G-d's Creation and although they may flourish for a while, they will ultimately disappear. The world was created in order to give Man the opportunity to grow spiritually and acknowledge G-d. The only function of the wicked is to show us how evil is always punished, that there is no escape from G-d's judgment. Although we may at times despair that the wicked go unpunished and the good suffer, we must always remember that G-d will punish the depraved and the impious.

The second lesson is that not all enterprises succeed, that there are failures, disappointments and unrealized dreams. Rav Soloveitchik suggests that this is the underlying message of this story. In our lives, we may have all encountered opposition and obstacles; our plans did not always come true. On those occasions, we may be dumbfounded by failure and may become depressed by defeat. However, the Torah teaches us that even G-d's enterprise may fail, His dream may not be fulfilled, and that one may start over and try again. We all may have change of plans, alternate ways, even sadness at some loss. Yet, there should be no room for despair, and we should always have room for hope and a new beginning. The story of the Reconstruction of the world is the most beautiful message of optimism. After all is wiped out, everything can come back again. The losses may be filled again; the world once gone can be reborn.

In life there will be losses and these losses are inexorable and universal. We have to learn how to live with losses and disappointments. In this story of the Flood, the beautiful message of the Torah is optimism. Alongside the tragedy of a Universal Destruction, one may perceive the blossoming of hope and the promise of new beginnings.